

The LECTERN

Thursday, April 29, 2010

'What Is To Be Done?' Nikolai Chernyshevsky



Beauty is life; beautiful is that being in which we see life as it should be according to our conceptions; beautiful is the object which expresses, or reminds us of life.

The Aesthetic Relations Between Art and Reality.
Chernyshevsky.

Vera Pavlovna lives under the thumb of her gorgon-like mother, who wants to marry her off to the owner of the tenement block where they reside. Vera has aspirations of her own, and makes friends with the tutor of her kid brother, a medical student named Lopukhov. Through subterfuge, and in order to save her from a loveless marriage and lifelong servitude to her family – the usual lot of women of her class- he marries her, snatching her out from under the nose of the other suitor and her mother. They set up house together, in separate rooms, and Vera feels liberated from what she calls 'the cellar', signifying her life and expectations before her marriage. Vera sets up a small business as a seamstress, and with the help of some other girls, the business takes off and expands; they open branches, and run the operation as a cooperative, with all the girls living together and sharing the profits. Soon, she falls in love with Lopukhov's friend and classmate, Kirsanov. Lopukhov, realising that he is in the way, and that his marriage to Vera was only in order to help her achieve her independence, removes himself from the scene, with the assistance and under the guidance of an extraordinary man, Rakhmetov, so as not to block their happiness. Eventually, Kirsanov and Vera marry, and all live happily ever after.

Despite its rather unprepossessing plot and premise, this 1863 novel, now all but forgotten except by die-hard Russophiles, was probably the single most important literary work in Russian of the second half of the 19th century. The revolutionary Plekhanov said it was the most important work in Russia since the introduction of the printing press; Lenin knew the book by heart, and borrowed the title for one of his own key texts; Marx called Chernyshevsky *the only original mind of contemporary economists*; and copies of the journal in which it first appeared were regarded as precious heirlooms for generations of Russians.

The reasons for the impact of this novel lie in the external historical context and the internal subject matter and its treatment. The 1860s was a period of growing radicalism. The highly autocratic Tsar Nicholas had died, to general relief and rejoicing, in 1855, and the new Tsar, Alexander II had introduced reforms, culminating in the emancipation of the peasants in 1861. However, for many, the new reforms had not gone far enough, and the lot of the peasants had not really been effected by the emancipation. The new generation of middle class students - the sons of priests, middle level clerks and minor officials –*the raznochintsy, the intelligentsia, the men of mixed background*- wanted more. After the debacle of the Crimean War, in which the incompetence and corruption of the Tsarist regime were made clear for all to see, this restlessness in the *raznochintsy* radicalised into the formation of Russia's first revolutionary group, *Land and Freedom*, in 1861. The sons were determined to wrest the future of Russia away from the fathers. The country was being united by the rapid development of railroads and print media, and literacy was on the rise. Turgenev's novel of 1862 *Fathers and Sons* had caused widespread and heated discussion (and rioting), and Dostoevsky's book of the same year *Notes from the House of The Dead* had alerted its readers to the injustices and horrors of the Tsarist penal system. The key figure in this ferment was Nikolai Chernyshevsky, philosopher, Westernizer, teacher, polemicist, underground revolutionary, literary and social critic of the leading journal of the time, *The Contemporary*, political prisoner and exile. In this his first novel, written in prison, Chernyshevsky described the *raznochintsy*, not as they were, but, more importantly, as how they *should be according to our conceptions*. This was both in keeping with Chernyshevsky's aesthetics and his politics. Let's look at how these interact in the novel.

Chernyshevsky's aesthetics were social utilitarian, and can best be summed up by the quote from his Master's thesis given above. Art should have a social purpose, to show how things should be, and

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- Melville (13)
- Poetry (20)
- Pushkin (5)
- Russia (85)
- Segalen (4)
- Sinology (42)
- Someone on Something (128)
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Murr

thus help to bring those things into being. The criteria for beauty was how far the art work helped to bring about social change. His portraits of the three protagonists of the book were intended, therefore, to show how men and women could live together in equality, respecting their equal rights. Rather than having life and depth as characters, they are more ciphers of an ideal. Lopukhov and Kirsanov are described as being almost exactly like each other, interchangeable, as they are for Vera. The portrait of Rakhmetov, *the extraordinary man*, is intended to show the ideal revolutionary, and to describe the process of becoming committed to the revolution, and the form that commitment should take. His portrait includes Christ-like elements, and his backstory draws on ancient Russian hagiographies in its elements of renunciation of worldly goods and passions, the embracing of asceticism in the service of a higher ideal, and the rigorous training of mind and body according to the dictates of revolutionary necessity. The narrator specifically tells us that Rakhmetov has no purpose in the story other than to provide a contrast to the other characters, to show the reader how ordinary the other characters are: *If I hadn't shown you the figure of Rakhmetov, the majority of readers would have misunderstood the main characters of my story, seeing them as heroes, whereas they are in fact ordinary people. ...No, my friends, it is not they who stand too high, it is you who stand too low.* As Vera and her men stand in relationship to the reader, as models for what should be, so Rakhmetov stands in relation to the other three. Rakhmetov is both a symbol of the necessity for commitment to revolution, and a symbol of the utilitarian aesthetic: *Rakhmetov has been introduced to fulfil the principal, most fundamental requirement of art, and exclusively to satisfy it* says the narrator.

In keeping with the utilitarian aesthetic, large parts of the novel are taken up with conversations between the characters in which Chernyshevsky's philosophy and politics are put forward in dialogue form, in an attempt to educate the reader, and to show how one should live according to the dictates of theory, in full revolutionary consciousness. One of the key ideas is 'rational egoism', roughly summarised as the notion that everyone is motivated by self-interest, that one never knowingly acts against his own best interests (Chernyshevsky was heavily influenced in his thinking by the English Utilitarians), and that a full awareness of this will show one the way forward. Thus, when Lopukhov is debating with himself how to deal with his friends' love for each other he says: *How true the theory is: egoism plays with man. I concealed the most important thing... I was silent because it wasn't to my advantage to speak. It's pleasant to observe as a theorist the tricks that egoism plays in practice.* As a result of this awareness he makes his decision to withdraw. For Chernyshevsky, and the characters in his novel, this rational egoism is constantly balanced against altruism, as immediate personal ends have to be sacrificed for social ends which will only have personal benefit in the long term. The goal of society and personal development is to achieve the state where one's own personal self-interests converge with those of the majority, creating the best conditions for the individual and for the common good.

Another key idea is that of complete equality between the sexes, on every level, domestic, economic and political. Vera and Lopukhov can only enter each other's rooms with permission; and they establish a third room, the neutral space, where they talk and take tea together. Vera starts her workshop at the instigation of her husband, so that she will have economic independence. Chernyshevsky lambasts traditional notions of marriage and jealous love, which include the idea of possession, both in a sexual sense and an economic one: *What filth, what pure filth – "possession". Who dares possess another person?* burning words in view of the status of the peasants, who, although they had been given political emancipation, still remained in debt to their previous owners. This relationship of equality between the sexes is symbolic of the relationship of equality between the classes, and it's in this that Chernyshevsky aligns himself with the key figures of European socialism. The description of the workshops which Vera and her sisters start, and the lodging houses they instigate is long and detailed, showing the influence of Robert Owen's cooperatives, and Fourier's *phalansteres*. In *Vera Pavlovna's Fourth Dream*, the most famous and radical part of the novel, in which Vera's dream of the coming Golden Age to be achieved by revolution, an agrarian Utopia is depicted. This has strong similarities with William Morris's Utopian vision in *News from Nowhere*, Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*, and influenced Zamyatin's *We*. The symbol for this coming Utopia is a huge crystal palace complete with electricity, modelled along Paxton's Crystal Palace, an image of technological modernity.

Apart from the political ideas and the utilitarian aesthetic, perhaps the most interesting thing about the book from a literary point of view, is the various strategies Chernyshevsky adopted to deal with the censorship. Although Chernyshevsky predicted the revolution in the book as taking place in 1865 (two years after the writing of the book, and some years after the final events depicted in it), the revolution is not named or described directly. There is copious use of euphemisms: *the common cause*, *the extraordinary man*, *matters of concern devoted to nothing or no one in particular*, and elliptical references to revolutionary groups of which Lopukhov and Kirsanov are members. The novel has three beginnings. The first describes a 'foolish' incident and the ramifications of that incident. The second is a preface from the author which voices conventional platitudes about the lack of the skill of the writer, and humbly hopes his readers will forgive him. This preface both hides and signals to alert readers the way to decipher the revolutionary ambiguities: *when I address you, it behoves me to spell everything out – since you are merely amateurs, and not at all experts at deciphering unstated meanings*. The third beginning starts the story proper with an account of Vera's childhood and life in


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her 'cellar', before her liberation and the dawning of her revolutionary consciousness. At the end, the novel disintegrates in a series of small snippets of prose alternating with poetry, both Russian and foreign, contemporary and traditional, but all with heavily disguised revolutionary themes, signifying not an ending, but a possible new beginning. Chernyshevsky himself appears again and again in the novel, breaking the frame in a kind of pre-Brechtian *verfremdungseffekt*, warning the reader not to expect certain things, to expect certain others, arguing with an invented figure, the sarcastically named *perspicacious reader*, alluding to his imprisonment in highly veiled terms, addressing the characters directly, and commenting on the action and the conversations: *I understand how much Lopukhov is compromised in the eyes of my enlightened public by Marya Aleksaevna's sympathy for his way of thinking. But I don't wish to play favourites and won't conceal the evidence.* The participation in the plot of the revolutionary Rakhmetov is bordered around with complex alienating strategies: first the 'perspicacious reader' interrupts the story to note how he thinks that Rakhmetov will play a prominent role in the narrative, then Chernyshevsky replies that *on the contrary he will play neither a principal role nor a secondary one, nor any role at all in the rest of my novel.* Why has he been introduced then? exclaims the perspicacious reader in vexation. I'll tell you later, replies Chernyshevsky, *and you can try to guess. For that purpose I'll put a long thick black line between sections. See what good care I take of you?* Then, after a thick black line in the text, follows the incident in which Rakhmetov is involved in the plot, followed by a new numbered section entitled: *A Conversation with the Perspicacious Reader, Followed by His Expulsion.* These strategies are designed –as Chernyshevsky himself tells us– to highlight the fact that the portrait of Rakhmetov is intended to spur the reader to revolutionary commitment.

Through these, and other strategies, The discourse is always disrupting the normal experience of reading a novel by preventing the reader from settling into an alternative novelistic reality, in favour of awakening a fully conscious awareness of the didactic purpose of the book.

Come up out of your godforsaken underworld, my friend, come up. It's not so difficult. Come out into the light of day, where life is good; the path is easy and inviting. Try it: development, development

Tell everyone that the future will be radiant and beautiful. Love it, strive toward it, work for it, bring it nearer, transfer into the present as much as you can from it.

Posted by Murr at [10:13 AM](#) 

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